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The Greek strain in English
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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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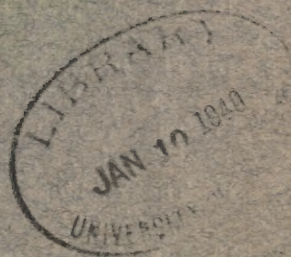
The Greek Strain in English Literature

An Address delivered by

Professor John Burnet, F.B.A.

(1863-1928)

Eng. Lit - H 8 C



February, 1920

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AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

This is a joint meeting of the Classical Association of Scotland, of which I have the honour to be President, and of the Scottish Branch of the English Association, of which I am a humble member. It is the first meeting of the kind, but I trust it will be followed by others. In an age of specialization like the present it is of great importance that we should realize the fundamental unity of our studies. The literature of Western Europe can only be understood if it is regarded as a single development which has its roots in antiquity. I do not mean merely that, since the Revival of Learning, all modern European literatures have been influenced, in a greater or less degree, by classical models. That is generally recognized, and there is no need to insist on it. I mean rather that the tradition has never been broken, and that, even during those periods when men were quite incapable of realizing the life of antiquity, and when the separation of the Eastern and Western Churches had made a direct knowledge of Greek almost impossible, it was still the thought of Greece, and especially the Platonic philosophy, that really inspired the literature of Western Europe.

I think it will help to make my meaning clearer if I give you a concrete illustration of what I mean. It is one which I have briefly discussed elsewhere, though not in a very accessible place,¹ and I am glad to have the opportunity of submitting it now to a wider circle of students. You remember, of course, the opening scene of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*, where Lorenzo gives Jessica a lecture on the true meaning of music. It is a wonderful passage, and it is constantly quoted, though it does not appear that it is generally understood. The commentators give us singularly little help in the matter. Some of them talk vaguely about 'the music of the spheres', though, as it happens, Lorenzo does not even mention 'the spheres'.

¹ See *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, edited by I. Gollancz (London, 1916), pp. 58 ff.

None of them seems to realize that the ultimate source of the whole passage is Plato's *Timaeus*, though it should be evident at once to any one who has read that dialogue. I do not suggest, of course, that Shakespeare himself had read it. We shall see presently that there were many channels by which a knowledge of its leading doctrines may have reached him. The first thing, however, is to be quite clear that Lorenzo's theory is just the central doctrine of Pythagoreanism as that is contained in the *Timaeus*.

According to the followers of Pythagoras, Music was a 'purgation' (κάθαρσις) of the soul, just as Medicine was a purgation of the body.¹ That is, of course, the origin of the much discussed Aristotelian doctrine of tragedy as a 'purge' or 'purification', but Lorenzo takes us a good deal further than that. There is no hint in Aristotle of the theory implied in the words 'Such harmony is in immortal souls', a line which it is impossible to understand rightly unless we know that Shakespeare is here using 'harmony' in the Greek acceptance of that term. In Greek music there was no harmony in the modern sense. The word ἁρμονία means primarily 'tuning', and then, by a natural development, 'scale', 'octave', 'key'. Now the doctrine of Pythagoras was that the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets then known, with the heaven of the fixed stars, formed a scale or octave, the intervals of which were numerically determined by the distances between their orbits. That octave, as we learn from the *Timaeus*, has its counterpart in the immortal soul of each one of us; for the circular motions of the soul of man only reproduce on a smaller scale the mightier revolutions of the Soul of the World, which are the planetary orbits. Were it not for the earthy and perishable nature of the body our souls would, therefore, sound in perfect accord with the grander music of the Cosmos. As it is, the body forms a barrier between the Soul of Man and the Soul of the World, and this barrier it is the function of music to overcome. It can do so because, on the one hand, it can reach the soul through the bodily sense of hearing, while, on the other, it is itself attuned to the celestial diapason. So it comes about that, when we hear 'sweet music', our nature is changed for the time, the motions of our 'spirits' are brought into accord with those of the heavenly bodies, and we are at one with what is highest. On the other hand, a soul which does not respond to music is altogether out of tune with the Soul of the World. In this case, it is not only the body that bars the way; the soul itself

¹ For a fuller discussion of these matters see my *Greek Philosophy, Part I, Thales to Plato* (1914), pp. 45 ff.

armonia?
harmonia

rings untrue. All that is genuine Pythagorean doctrine, and I think you will agree that it throws a good deal of light upon Lorenzo's speech.

I have mentioned already that Lorenzo says nothing at all about the 'crystal spheres' of which Milton has made such splendid use in his *Ode on the Nativity*. That is another indication of the source of his doctrine. The Pythagoreans and Plato knew nothing of the theory that the planets were fixed on spheres, crystalline or otherwise. These belong to a later generation. The astronomer Eudoxus of Cyzicus, who was a somewhat independent member of the Platonic Academy, had elaborated a most ingenious geometrical construction of concentric spheres to explain the apparent irregularities in the planetary motions. Each of the heavenly bodies was provided with as many spheres as seemed necessary to account for its apparent course as a composite motion made up of simple circular motions, the planet itself being regarded as attached to one of the spheres. Aristotle converted this purely geometrical hypothesis into a mechanical explanation, and the spheres came to be regarded as material, though transparent. Hence the 'crystal spheres', of which there is no hint in Shakespeare. He is inspired by an earlier theory than Aristotle's.

On the other hand, he does modify the Pythagorean and Platonic imagery in one important respect, and this will give us a hint of the intermediaries through which the doctrine reached him. In the myth of Er in Plato's *Republic*, there is a Siren on each of the planetary orbits who sings in monotone her proper note in the octave. For these sirens Shakespeare substitutes angels and cherubim, and that goes back in the long run to the book which passed under the name of Paul's Athenian convert, Dionysius the Areopagite, who was further identified with St. Denis of France. As a matter of fact, this work is from the hand of a Christian disciple of Proclus, the great systematizer of 'Neoplatonism' (6th cent. A. D.), and it was one of the main channels by which the Platonist tradition was preserved in the Middle Ages. It was translated into Latin by John the Scot (commonly called Scotus Erigena, 9th cent. A. D.), and its supposed authorship gave it almost canonical authority. We may fairly infer, then, that the Platonic doctrine reached Shakespeare, as it reached Dante, in a mediaeval dress.

It must never be forgotten that down to the thirteenth century it was Plato, not Aristotle, that inspired the best thought of Western Europe. The ground had been prepared by St. Augustine (4th cent. A. D.), and much of the material was made accessible in Latin by Boethius (5th-6th cent. A. D.), whose mathematical, astronomical,

and musical treatises were zealously studied. Moreover, his *Consolation of Philosophy* was, perhaps, the most popular book of the Middle Ages. There are about 400 MSS. of it in the libraries of Europe, and it was translated into nearly all the vernaculars. Among its English translators we find no lesser names than those of King Alfred and Chaucer. That was the beginning of popular Platonism in England; for the *Consolation* contains the fundamentals of Plato's doctrine. We must also bear in mind that one dialogue of Plato, the *Timaeus*, was known in the early Middle Ages from a Latin version of the greater part of it made by Chalcidius in the fourth cent. A. D., so that the scholars of the twelfth century really knew far more about Plato than they did about Aristotle. This early Platonism culminated in the School of Chartres, to which we owe the treatise *On the Universe* (*de universitate mundi*) of Bernard Silvester of Tours. This is written in the form of a *Satura Menippea*, that is, in alternate prose and verse, a fashion which the *Consolation* of Boethius had set for subsequent Platonists. It is in two books, entitled *Megacosmos*^{Pharo} and *Microcosmos*, the latter dealing with man as a smaller counterpart of the universe, as in Plato's *Timaeus*. The term *microcosmos*^{kosmos} is found already in Isidore of Seville (6th-7th cent. A. D.), but the vogue of the word 'microcosm' is due to the popularity of Bernard's work. Another indication of the influence exercised by the Platonism of Chartres is furnished by the fact that the personification of Nature, which was quite unknown to antiquity, originated in this school. In his *Parliament of Fowls* (v. 316) Chaucer refers to Alan of Lille's *Complaint of Nature* (*planctus naturae*) for a description of 'the goddess Nature', and it is from him he borrows the title 'God's Vicar-general' which he confers upon her. I need hardly insist on the importance of this for the history of English literature.

The truth is that Platonism has always appealed to the English mind. Professor W. P. Ker has pointed out¹ that the central doctrine of 'Neoplatonism' is clearly stated in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (vv. 2149 ff.), and that this statement is based on Chaucer's own translation of Boethius. It is not at all surprising, then, that, in the fifteenth century, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, the brother of Henry V, possessed a Latin translation of the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*, which had been made in Sicily in the twelfth century, and had been brought to England at once by Robert the Englishman, who had been Chancellor to Duke Roger. This translation was certainly read; for it was transcribed more than once. Duke Humphrey's copy was written in 1423. We also find that Duke Humphrey got a Latin

¹ *Dark Ages*, p. 109.

translation of the *Republic* from an Italian scholar, Decembrio, and the correspondence which passed between them on the subject is still extant. We may, then, regard it as established that it was perfectly possible for an Englishman to have a considerable knowledge of Plato's philosophy more than a century before the birth of Shakespeare. Moreover Platonist doctrines were popularized by the poetry of the time, and, in particular, by Jehan de Meung's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*. Another channel by which they may have reached the people is through sermons and Morality plays. A mere glance at so obvious a source as the first volume of Dodsley's *Old Plays* will suffice to show that this did in fact happen. The *Interlude of the Four Elements* is a compendium of Greek physics, the sources of which are at once obvious to any student of that subject, while the very title of *The Marriage of Wit and Science* is pure Plato. It is a probable conjecture that Shakespeare's undoubted knowledge of Platonism came to him in part from sources of this kind. At any rate, there was a floating mass of Platonism in the England of his youth, and he was just the man to feel the influence of it.

To return to Lorenzo, it appears to me that the original source of the theory he expounds is to be found in a remarkable passage of the commentary on the *Timaëus* by Chalcidius. There we read (c. CCLXVII) that Plato had built up the soul in accordance with the intervals of the octave, and had said that its natural actions consisted in rhythm and melody, but that these faded away from the soul as forgetfulness took possession of it from its partnership with the body. Wherefore the souls of the many are unmodulated. 'He says that the remedy for this fault is to be found in music. . . . It is this divine music which recalls to their pristine accord souls which have left the straight path of their orbits.'¹ I do not know in what precise

¹ Chalcidius, ed. Wrobel, p. 298. The passage is so important for our purpose that I give the original *in extenso*. 'Quia iuxta rationem harmonicam animam in superioribus aedificaverat, naturalesque eius actus rhythmis modisque constare dixerat, sed haec exolescere animae ob consortium corporis necessario obtinente oblivione, proptereaue immodulatas fore animas plurimorum. medelam huius vitii dicit esse in musica positam, non in ea qua vulgus delectatur, quaeque ad voluptatem facta excitat vitia nonnunquam, sed in illa divina, quae nunquam a ratione atque intelligentia separetur. hanc enim censet exorbitantes animas a via recta revocare demum ad symphoniam veterem. optima porro symphonia est in moribus nostris iustitia, virtutum omnium principalis, per quam ceterae quoque virtutes suum munus atque opus exequuntur; ut ratio quidem (i.e. τὸ λογιστικόν) dux sit, vigor vero intimus, qui est iracundiae similis (i.e. θυμός), auxiliatorem se rationi volens praebeat, porro (cum) haec provenire sine modulatione non possint, modulatio demum sine symphonia nulla sit, ipsa symphonia sequatur musicam, procul dubio musica exornat animam rationabiliter, ad

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way all this reached Shakespeare, but I should not be surprised if it were still discoverable. In this order of research almost everything remains to be done, and I cannot imagine a more promising field of work for a student.

I shall only indicate one other problem in the same scene with the hope that some one may be able to throw light upon it. The 'muddy vesture of decay' is definitely Orphic. In a fragment of Empedocles we read of man being clothed in a 'strange garment' (χιτών) of flesh, and the figure of the 'garment' or 'vesture' is often applied to the body. The Gnostics identified this with the 'coats of skins' (χιτῶνες δερμάτινοι) which God made for Adam and his wife (Gen. iii. 21). What is still more remarkable is that the epithet 'muddy' is a very accurate translation of the adjective χοϊκός, which is also found in this connexion.¹ Now this is the word used by St. Paul in the phrase rendered in our version 'of the earth earthy', but Shakespeare's equivalent is more accurate, and it would be interesting to know how he came by it. He did not get it from St. Paul, since the Vulgate has *terrenus*, just as the Authorized Version has 'earthy'. I must leave the problem for future research.

These are only jottings on a single scene of Shakespeare, and they do not profess to be either exhaustive or systematic. They are just such things as have forced themselves on my attention in the course of my own studies of Greek thought, and there is much more to be done in this direction. I venture to hope that some of you may be led to pursue the inquiry. I have, I think, been able to indicate the directions in which it will be worth while to look for light, and I would only say in conclusion that, so far as I can see, the writings of the School of Chartres are the main source of that popular Platonism which underlies English literature from a date long before the Revival of Learning.

antiquam naturam revocans et efficiens talem demum qualem initio deus opifex eam fecerat.' In an earlier passage (Wrobel, p. 140) we read 'Pythagoreorum dogma est ratione harmonica constare mundum caelestiaque distantia congruis et consonis sibi invicem intervallis impetu nimio et velocitate raptatus edere sonos musicos.' And again (Wrobel, p. 166) 'septemque circulos instituit planetum eosdemque adversum se distare facit intervallis musicis, ut iuxta Pythagoram motu harmonico stellae rotatae musicos in vertigine modos edant: similiter ut in Politia Sirenas singulis insistere circulis dicens, quas rotatas cum circulis unam ciere mellifluam cantilenam atque ex imparibus octo sonis unum concordem concentum excitari.'

¹ See Bernays, *Theophrastos' Schrift über Frömmigkeit*, n. 9, especially the words ἐπενδύεται τὸν χοϊκόν, τοὺς δερματίνοὺς χιτῶνας from the Valentinian Theodotus. In the (forged) 10th Epistle of Isocrates we have τὸν θύλακον ἑχέει δερμάτινον and τὸν πῆλινον ἀσκόν.

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